

Objectification Theory in History and Class Consciousness and Its Implications for Ideology Construction

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Abstract—As the pioneer and forerunner of Western Marxism, Lukács' ideas have had a significant impact on the development of Western Marxism and even Western philosophy. *History and Class Consciousness*, consisting of eight essays, is the most important work of Lukács's life. The objectification theory elaborated in the book has important implications for the critique of capitalist ideology and the reconstruction of the consciousness of the proletariat, as well as for contemporary ideological construction.

Keywords—objectification theory, ideology, Lukács, Western Marxism

I. INTRODUCTION

As the founder of Western Marxism, Lukács had a huge impact on the development of Marxism in the twentieth century. Lukács had joined the Hungarian Communist Party as a revolutionary. The period from 1919 to 1929 was the period when Lukács started the trend of Western Marxist thought. During this period, Lukács was forced into exile in Vienna. During his exile in Vienna, Lukács completed the most important work of his life, "History and Class Consciousness". This book is a collection of eight articles written by Lukács in the past, and it is a new interpretation of Marxism. Among them, the idea of materialization has had a huge impact. As an ideological weapon to criticize capitalism and a fulcrum to cultivate proletarian consciousness, materialization theory has important reference significance for the development of contemporary socialism with Chinese characteristics.

II. MAIN BODY

A. Background of the Emergence of Objectification Theory

1) Background of the times

The early twentieth century, when Lukács' idea of objectification was formed, was a period of vigorous development of capitalism and the contention of a hundred different currents of thought. Capitalism was moving from liberal capitalism to monopoly capitalism and was in a relatively mature stage. The development of science and technology promoted the development of the division of labor, which led to the continuous refinement and specialization of the division of labor, and various contradictions in capitalist society were constantly exposed, with waves of social revolutions [1]. And with the development of the capitalist commodity economy, human relations were increasingly replaced by relations between things, which meant that everything could be used for commodity trading. The labor of workers in factories was also abstracted, and the subjectivity of workers gradually

disappeared, no longer concerned with the reality of the development situation [2]. The outbreak of the First World War made the global situation more volatile. The October Revolution, which was completed triumphantly in Russia in 1917, stirred up revolutionary enthusiasm in other countries, but most of them ended in failure. In the 1890s, Engels' student Bernstein proposed a revision of Marxism, which led to a huge debate and a variety of social trends. It was in this context of the times that Lukács proposed the theory of objectification and used it as a focal point to propose the cultivation of proletarian consciousness and advocate the reconstruction of Marxism. The outbreak of the First World War made the global situation more volatile. The October Revolution, which was completed triumphantly in Russia in 1917, stirred up revolutionary enthusiasm in other countries, but most of them ended in failure. In the 1890s, Engels' student Bernstein proposed a revision of Marxism, which led to a huge debate and a variety of social trends [3]. It was in this context of the times that Lukács proposed the theory of objectification and used it as a focal point to propose the cultivation of proletarian consciousness and advocate the reconstruction of Marxism.

2) Source of ideas

a) Hegel's dialectics

Lukács' idea of objectification was deeply influenced by Hegel, but not in complete agreement with him. He has mentioned in the preface to the new edition of *History and Class Consciousness* that "during the First World War I began to study Marx again, though this time already driven by my general philosophical interests: no longer primarily by the scholars of the spiritual sciences of the time, but by Hegel" [4]. Hegel's philosophical thought is considered the pinnacle of nineteenth-century German idealist philosophy, and thus Lukács' understanding of materialization is tinged with a more pronounced idealism. It was not until the public publication of Marx's *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844* that Lukács reflected on his early proposed ideas on objectification. Hegel formally introduced alienation into classical German philosophy. Hegel understood alienation as idealistic, advocating the alienation of the Absolute Spirit, and that nature and human society are both external manifestations of the alienation of the Absolute Spirit, while ultimately nature and human society are unified in the Absolute Spirit. Lukács, influenced by Hegel's dialectic of totality, analyzes the phenomenon of materialization in capitalist society on the basis of dialectics, and advocates that things should be viewed from the perspective of totality, and the elimination of objectification should be examined from the perspective of the entire social history.

b) Simmel's ideas of subjective and objective culture

In 1881, Simmel received his doctorate from the University of Berlin. As an outstanding German sociologist and philosopher in the nineteenth century, Simmel's ideas had a great influence on many scholars. Between 1906 and 1907, Lukács was directly taught by Simmel, examined the historical development and direction of Western culture, absorbed Simmel's concept of subjective and objective culture, pointed out the influence of objective culture on subjective culture, the replacement of subjective culture by objective culture, and the gradual weakening of human subjective consciousness. The subjective culture is replaced by the objective culture, and the human subjective consciousness is gradually weakened and even gradually reduced to the tool of the objective culture. In his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel mentions that the monetary economy forces us to perform mathematical calculations constantly in the daily conduct of our affairs. Many people's lives are filled with this act of assessing, reckoning, and calculating qualitative values and reducing them to quantitative values The accuracy, precision, and rigor of economic relations in life - naturally affects other aspects of life -- go hand in hand with the expansion of monetary things, although they do not contribute to the formation of noble styles in the way of life. Only the monetary economy brings to practical life, and perhaps even to theoretical life, the idea of number-crunching. Here, Simmel analyzes how the monetary economy has made it possible for forms of monetary exchange to replace forms of physical exchange to have a tremendous impact on human practical life and human culture, and how money has an extremely powerful impact on society, politics, and the individual, even determining the self-worth and self-design of each individual.

c) Max Weber's culture of rationality

As a famous German sociologist, political scientist and philosopher, Max Weber's thought and theory have had a great impact. In particular, Weber believed that modern society is a process of secularization and rationalization, and put forward the idea of rationalization in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, arguing for the rationalization of the capitalist system and pointing out that capitalism is bound to exist. Lukács had studied with Max Weber, and this rational thought had a profound influence on Lukács, who claimed that Weber's influence on his thought came late but profound. Weber's analysis argued that workers do mechanical, repetitive, and rational work under a system that is considered rational, and that such labor is precisely calculated and rationalized. But Weber's description of the formal rationalization of capitalism contradicts the substantive unreasonableness of capitalism, so Lukács does not accept Weber's rationalization in its entirety. Rather, on the basis of critical inheritance, he developed the idea of objectification, including the following connotations: the rationalized system constantly divides labor capacities and traits, the labor process is constantly decomposed into local operations, the direct connection between laborers and products is severed, and human characteristics are re-calculated their values by the economic calculation system. The capabilities and characteristics of those who can produce greater value are

constantly amplified and given a higher value status, while, conversely, characteristics that cannot produce greater value are marginalized or even discarded, so that the commodified and materialized qualities of human beings are increasingly strengthened.

d) Marx's theory of commodity fetishism

Marx's idea of commodity fetishism in *Capital* is the direct ideological source of Lukács' theory of materialization. Marx analyzed that "it is evident that the mystery of the commodity form lies in nothing more than the fact that the commodity form reflects before people the social nature of their labor into the nature of the things of the products of labor themselves, into the natural social properties of these things, and thus reflects the social relation of the producer to total labor into the social relation of things to things that exist outside the producer. As a result of this transformation, the product of labor becomes a commodity, a sensible and supersensible thing or a social thing. This is only a certain social relation of people themselves, but it takes the illusory form of the relation of things to things in front of people" [5]. Lukács initiated the study of the theory of objectification under the influence of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. It is important to note here that although there are similarities between Lukács' theory of objectification and Marx's theory of alienation, Lukács' theory of objectification is not directly influenced by the idea of alienation. Because the first public publication of Marx's first work on alienation, the *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844*, came nine years after the publication of Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, it is unlikely that Lukács had read Marx's relevant treatise on alienation. On the basis of the fetishism of commodities, Lukács introduced the concept of "second nature," which refers to the initial objectivity of commodities formed by human labor. Production and production relations have the power of the subject, the purpose of production is no longer use value, but exchange value, and this production is not an affirmation of human power, but a slave human power [6].

B. The Connotation of Objectification Theory

1) The basic concept of objectification

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács develops the concept of objectification from Marx's theory of the fetishism of commodities. "It is possible to grasp first of all from this structural and fundamental fact, thanks to which man's own activity, man's own labor, opposes man as something objective, something that does not depend on him, something that controls him through a self-regulation alien to him. More precisely, this happens both in the objective and in the subjective aspect" [7] (p. 147). Lukács grasps the concept of objectification in both its subjective and objective aspects. On the objective side, a world arises in which laws can be known but cannot be changed and which, in opposition to people, consists of ready-made objects and relations between things. From the subjective side, where the commodity economy is developed, human activity also becomes a commodity and is objectified. This commodity obeys the natural laws of society but does not depend on man for its movement, and is no different from any kind of consumer goods. In a materialized capitalist society, man

becomes a thing, and the subject-object relationship between man and thing is reversed, and the thing, as an object created by man, in turn controls man. Individuals living in a society full of materialistic consciousness lose their criticality and transcendence and become the appendages of things. Thus, Lukács points out that “the nature of the commodity structure, which has been stressed many times, is based on the fact that the relationship between man and man acquires the nature of an object and thus a ‘ghostly objectivity’ which, with its strict, seemingly perfect and rational self-regulation, conceals its essential nature, i.e., all traces of the relationship between persons” [7] (p. 144).

2) *The similarities and differences between objectification and alienation*

a) *The similarities between objectification and alienation*

(1) The basic content is consistent

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács suggests that “due to this fact, man’s own activity, man’s own labor, opposes man as something objective, something that does not depend on him, something that controls him through alienation from his self-regulation” [7] (p. 147). Correspondingly, Marx, in his *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844*, points out that alienation means that the subject, in the process of its own development, creates the object as its antithesis, which in turn acts as an alien, external force against the subject. From the above expressions of Lukács and Marx, it can be concluded that both of them consider objectification and alienation as a phenomenon in which the subject creates the object, but the object in turn dominates the subject; the appearance of objectification and alienation makes the subject lose its subjectivity and become an object of domination, i.e., man creates a force that binds himself or even enslaves him.

(2) The dimensions of critique are consistent

Both Lukács and Marx critiqued capitalist society from the perspective of exposing the capitalist system, the plight of modern man’s existence, and the relentless oppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. In capitalist society, with the development of social division of labor and commodity economy, people are increasingly divided into many parts and lose their subjectivity. Lukács points out that “as the labor process becomes more and more rationalized and mechanized, the workers’ activity loses more and more of its own initiative, becomes an intuitive attitude, and thus loses more and more of its will On the one hand, their mechanized partial labor, that is, their labor force in relation to their whole personality objectification in opposition to their whole personality becomes a constant and insurmountable daily reality, so much so that the personality here too can only watch as an onlooker, inactive, as his own existing in becomes an isolated molecule, added to the system of the alien” [7] (p. 144). Marx also suggested in the *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844* that “the more wealth the worker produces, the greater the force and quantity of his product, the poorer he becomes. The more the worker creates, the more he becomes a cheap commodity This fact merely shows that the object produced by labor, and the product of labor, as an alien being, as a force that does not depend on the producer, is opposed to labor The worker’s relation to the relation of

the worker to the product of his own labor is the same alien object relation. For according to this presupposition, it is clear that the more power the worker expends in his labor, the more power he creates with his own hands against his own, alien object-world” [8]. From the above two descriptions, it is clear that both Lukács and Marx stood in sympathy with the working class and directed their criticism against the bourgeoisie and capitalist society as a whole. And both Lukács and Marx believe that both materialization and alienation are historical in nature and will eventually be eliminated, while the proletariat is the leading force in eliminating materialization and alienation.

b) *The difference between objectification and alienation*

(1) Different definitions of objectification

In his *Philosophical Manuscripts on Economics of 1844*, Marx makes a clear distinction between objectification and alienation, and argues that alienation and objectification are completely different concepts. The objectification of labor is the actualization of labor, and the product of labor is the objectified labor fixed into the object, and objectification is a kind of corroboration of human capacity. Alienation, however, exists as an alien force, and man should be subjective, a being of free and conscious activity. But with the development of the capitalist system, the emergence of the division of labor has led to the division of workers in the process of labor, where workers’ own labor is forced to become a commodity to be sold to capitalists, but the products they create in turn enslave them, leading to the fact that the more products workers create, the stronger the forces that in turn bind and oppress them. Thus, Marx makes a clear distinction between objectification and alienation, but Lukács’s understanding of objectification in *History and Class Consciousness* is a general one, expressed as an understanding of objectification on the basis of alienation, abstractly treating objectification, alienation and objectification as the same logic.

(2) Different ways to eliminate alienation and objectification

Marx analyzed the emergence and elimination of alienation from the standpoint of materialism. Marx believed that private property and alienation interact and that alienated labor is the essence of private property. Therefore, to abandon alienation it is necessary to eliminate private property, destroy capitalist private ownership, and realize communism. In a communist society, labor becomes the first need of man, and man achieves free and comprehensive development and the abandonment of alienated labor. Therefore, it is necessary to vigorously develop the productive forces, to eliminate the old division of labor, and for the proletariat to carry out a violent revolution with the bourgeoisie to achieve the possession of material goods. And Lukács’s proposal of the way of eliminating objectification is tinged with idealism. According to Lukács, objectification deprives human existence and historical processes of their intrinsic totality, which ultimately leads to the fragmentation of the human world and the entire socio-historical development process, and therefore, the abandonment of objectification depends on the restoration of totality [9]. Totality is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, the state in which man as subject and object are united, and the loss of this totality

leads to objectification. And the reconstruction of totality can only be achieved by the awakening of the class consciousness of the proletariat.

C. Implications of Objectification Theory for Contemporary Times

1) Establish a human-centered view of science and technology and the correct view and rational use of science and technology

The development of science and technology has greatly improved the productivity of labor, especially after the third technological revolution, the application of science and technology has penetrated into all aspects of social life, facilitating people's production and life. However, the development of science and technology also makes people become subordinate to science and technology, and some workers face the risk of being replaced by artificial intelligence operations and thus lose their jobs. The high development of science and technology can also invade people's spirituality, and over-dependence on science and technology and the pursuit of science and technology can make the humanistic spirit missing. Therefore, we need to keep in mind that science and technology is a double-edged sword, and we should not only use science and technology rationally, but also be wary of the loss of human subjectivity brought about by the further refinement of the division of labor, and insist that science and technology should be owned by the people and used by the people. The goal of science and technology should be for the better development of human beings, not to become a material or spiritual shackle that binds human beings and thus overrides them.

2) Be wary of consumerism and all kinds of misconceptions about consumption and improve the state of mind

From the traditional concept of consumption, it should be people consume products, people have the need for a certain product function, and then to buy goods. But with the development of the market economy, more and more advertisers are doing everything possible to promote goods, the market is flooded with publicity and promotion of goods. People are often incited to buy many non-essential consumer goods and become subservient to them. When describing the theory of objectification, Lukács points out that when the commodity economy develops to a certain level, things will dominate people, and people become overly dependent on things, or even completely dominated by them. Therefore, we should advocate correct, reasonable and healthy consumption concepts, cleanse the society of consumerism and money-worshiping concepts, and improve the state of mind.

III. CONCLUSION

Although Lukács' idea of objectification has certain limitations compared to Marx's theory of alienation, the study of the idea of objectification is still of great significance. Lukács's idea of objectification in History and Class Consciousness occupies an important seat in all the ideological theories of his life. He profoundly analyzed the current development of capitalism at that time, put forward

the theory of objectification, and extended this theory from the economic field to the social, institutional, legal, and ideological fields. This not only has important guiding significance for our further study of Marxism, but also has important implications for the current development of China's socialist market economy and the layout of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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